# VEILED IDENTITIES

**Drd. Nicoleta Petronela APOSTOL**
**Universitatea "Babeş-Bolyai", Cluj Napoca**

*Abstract*

The paper discusses Aldous Huxley's novel, The Genius and the Goddess, with special emphasis on Henry Maartens, the genius, and his wife, Katy, the goddess, revealing two individuals struggling with the surroundings, but also with themselves, in an attempt to acknowledge who they really are and what their purpose in life is. The two individuals' way of living and of perceiving existence is presented by John Rivers, an old physicist, whose life was deeply influenced by that couple when he was young and whose commentaries reveal the couple's approach to the self and to the others contributing to a different view of his own self.

The starting point of this research has been the inquiry launched by the main storyteller of Huxley's novel, *The Genius and the Goddess*, John Rivers who wonders about his own identity in connection to his experience and in relation to the encounters he has had over time. He poses the following question: 'How can anyone seriously believe in his own identity?'[1] It is the point when Rivers reaches some sort of awareness about his own self and he tries to find some answers to his existence up to that moment. Before discussing the veiled identities of Huxley's novel I shall offer a brief definition of one stage of personal identity, stage which is practicable for my undertaking, as it appears in *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*: "The modern history of the topic of personal identity begins with Locke, who held that the identity of a person consists neither in the identity of an immaterial substance (as dualists might be expected to hold) nor in the identity of a material substance or "animal body" (as materialists might be expected to hold), and that it consists instead in "same consciousness." His view appears to have been that the persistence of a person through time consists in the fact that certain actions, thoughts, experiences, etc., occurring at different times, are somehow united in memory." [2] The idea that one's identity consists in 'same consciousness' will be quite fruitful for our analysis as the characters in the novel achieve some self-awareness according to the way they handle their consciousness.

Having in mind the idea that in order to grasp one's identity one needs to be aware of one's thoughts and feelings and to keep one's conscience awaken, we extend John's question about his identity by providing the lines following it: "'How can anyone seriously believe in his own identity?' he went on. 'In logic, A equals A. Not in fact. Me-now is one kettle of fish;

[1] Aldous Huxley, *The Genius and the Goddess*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1955, p. 45.
[2] Robert Audi, general editor, *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, Second Edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 661.



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me-then is another. I look at the John Rivers who felt that way about Katy. It's like a puppet play, it's like Romeo and Juliet through the wrong end of the opera glasses. No, it's not even that; it's like looking through the wrong end of the opera glasses at the ghosts of Romeo and Juliet. And Romeo once called himself John Rivers, and was in love, and had at least ten times more life and energy than at ordinary times. And the world he was living in – how totally transfigured!"[3] The passage offers several insights into John Rivers's past and present, placing the accent on the distinction emerged in his thinking, with the passing of time. John's question *How can anyone seriously believe in his own identity?* represents one of his major moral and existential dilemmas.

Charles Taylor discussed in his book, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, the connection between the moral field and the act of defining one's identity, underlining some ways in which an individual may answer the question about his identity: "Who am I? But this can't necessarily be answered by giving name and genealogy. What this question offers us is an understanding of what is of crucial importance to us. To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand."[4] This way of answering the question *who am I?* is quite appropriate for our analysis of Huxley's novel. John Rivers is the character who, reaching old age, tries to bring to light (through the development of a narrative of his past and his present) what was and what is of crucial importance to him. The narrative he unfolds in front of his friend, on a winter evening, is one in which he goes after finding out the stand he took several years ago when he was merely starting to live. Charles Taylor underlines that one's identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which offer a background for the choices one makes. At an old age, John realizes that his identity was shaped by the events he went through and he has doubts about trusting that identity because it changes over time maybe without his awareness.

Remembering the times of his youth and particularly his way of perceiving the world and the surroundings, remembering the young John Rivers, he mentions: "I remember how he looked at landscapes; and the colours were incomparably brighter, the patterns that things made in space unbelievably beautiful. I remember how he glanced around him in the streets, and St Louis, believe it or not, was the most splendid city ever built. People, houses, trees, T-

[3] Aldous Huxley, *op. cit.*, p. 45.
[4] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 27.



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model Fords, dogs at lamp-posts - everything was more significant. Significant, you may ask, of what? And the answer is: themselves. These were realities, not symbols." [5] Going back in the past helps Rivers come across the important things for his life. He relives the special moments when the colours seemed *incomparably brighter*, when everything seemed *unbelievably beautiful* – aspects which make us infer that the present does not allow him those small joys or he simply is not capable anymore of experiencing them the way he used to. We grasp a sense of nostalgia after some irreversible moments, feeling also aroused by the narrative he accepted to unravel which implied unexpected encounters with his thoughts and beliefs. We notice here the insistence on the fact that in his youth things were meaningful for themselves and he perceived them as realities, not symbols. Things seemed to have a certain consistency in those times, but the passing of time changed his views of them. These aspects contribute to the shaping of John's identity and draw attention to the role played by the past events in the development of his self-awareness. His narrative is meant to help him find ways of understanding the couple Henry-Katy, whose influence upon his development was considerable.

The question whether one can really trust one's identity may also be extended to the people around him. Because the question was raised in connection to a specific moment from his past, when he was in love with a goddess. I shall now extend my analysis to the couple John met in his youth. At the age of twenty eight, John has the opportunity of his life. After he gets his Ph. D., he receives a letter from Henry Maartens, a great physicist, offering him a job as one of his research assistants. It is the moment when John Rivers gets hold of his destiny. He accepts the job and leaves home and his mother, who controls him in the least details as he is her only child and her only consolation (her husband died). John's awareness of who he is starts from the moment he comes into contact with the Maartens family. His identity moves on a different path from that point. Everything that he has been taught will change under the influence of the couple he meets and his way of thinking and of perceiving the world will gain distinct meanings due to the new and sometimes shocking (for him at least they are shocking at that point) challenges Rivers has to face. Charles Taylor says that "One is a self only among other selves. A self can never be described without reference to those who surround it."[6] John Rivers comes to acknowledge numerous aspects about the human being through the contact he has with this family and the shaping of his self is the result of his interaction with the selves that surround him. Each individual deepens his perception of life and makes him wonder more about the meanings of existence.

[5] Aldous Huxley, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-46.
[6] Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 35.



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In the following pages we pursue the relation between Henry Maartens and his wife, Katy, without leaving aside the perspective from which we are acquainted with the couple and the influence it exercised upon John's consciousness. All the information we receive about the Maartens family comes through John Rivers's narrative. He met the couple when he was twenty eight and their influence upon his character was such that even in old age he is not fully capable of grasping that experience. The first contact with the Maartens was when John went to their house after accepting to work as Henry's assistant. The reader witnesses a scene filled with confusion, indifference, isolation, illness, art, beauty and wonder, etc. As Rivers is the one who retells the first encounter with the Maartens the scene is granted with John's perception of the new environment and people. John tries to guide himself in the unfamiliar atmosphere, but his education and his shyness impede him from greeting the family in a more convincing manner. It is obvious he does not feel comfortably there and his voice is barely heard. Each family member has his/her preoccupation creating an unsociable atmosphere. Henry's asthma attack is the event which alerts his wife and annoys the little boy. Returning to the present John mentions his achievement of the ability to accept Henry's attacks as a normal thing later on and his change in conduct after spending some time in their home. At first sight Henry appears to be an old man close to dying, whereas Katy, his wife, makes herself noticed through her beauty. Each member of the family concentrates on something different thus John's presence passes unnoticed. To John, they seem distant individuals each one having their own *universe* to pay attention to. The Maartens were not accustomed to having guests and Rivers is the one who changes their home environment. Being with this family has made young John feel not only happy, but also good. He felt he could be useful for the family and that made him gain faith in himself and in the others.

In relation to the avalanche of feelings he felt for this family, for people in general, John mentions some features regarding Henry's character: "How could you feel affection for someone like Henry – someone so remote that he hardly knew who you were and so self-centred that he didn't even want to know? You couldn't be fond of him – and yet I was, I was. I liked him not merely for the obvious reasons – because he was a great man, because working with him was like having your own intelligence and insight raised to a higher power. I even liked him outside the laboratory, for the very qualities that made it all but impossible to regard him as anything but a kind of high-class monster."[7] We notice from this description that Henry's self does not seem to be one open to the ones around him, but despite this fact he is not totally incapable of being liked or even loved.

[7] Aldous Huxley, *op. cit.*, p. 23.



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If at this point John Rivers is able to share his love and affection with Henry, Katy, their children and with all people, things change as time passes. There comes a moment when John is confronted with a different Henry than the one he used to know. That moment is when Katy has to leave home in order to go to take care of her ill mother in Chicago. Henry is patient for a few days but when he sees that Katy does not return he becomes resentful of Katy's mother whom he accuses of faking an illness just to keep her daughter apart from her husband. Rivers is shocked by his attitude and he gradually touches a climax of the entire situation. During this period Henry acts either as a normal father (the first time John saw him in that role) or like a desperate man unable to control his jealousy, anger or doubts regarding his wife's journey. When a new doctor appears on the scene, helping Katy's mother to get better, Henry's anguish reaches the highest point and he starts talking to John about techniques of love-making, the anthropology of marriage, the statistics of sexual satisfaction – all intimate issues which have a great impact upon the identity of the young man brought up in strict rules regarding marriage and the relations between men and women. John is seen by Henry (or at least this is how John Rivers feels) as a simple individual with no name nor face, established there to give him the opportunity to express through words the anxiety and uncertainty he was feeling: "The part assigned to me was not that of the supporting character actor, not even that of the bit player who serves as confidante and errand-runner. No, I was merely the nameless, almost faceless extra, whose business it had been to provide the hero with his initial excuse for thinking out loud, and who now, by simply being on the spot, imparted to the overheard soliloquy a monstrousness, a sheer obscenity, which it would have lacked if the speaker had been alone."[8] John is in a way obliged to witness Henry's anxiety and by this, he is confronting his inner beliefs, his deepest feelings towards Katy and his thoughts about this genius of scientific field.

Getting acquainted with Henry's inwardness, John is able to discover his own identity as a reflection of the reactions he had in front of Henry's commentaries regarding his marriage and relations between spouses. Henry's identity is hidden because he has small moments of escaping his inner self. The situation created by Katy's departure is one that reveals some inner conflicts and also brings to surface Henry's dependence on his wife: "But for Henry, Kath wasn't a person; she was his food, she was a vital organ of his own body. When she was absent, he was like a cow deprived of grass, like a man with jaundice struggling to exist without a liver. It was an agony."[9] While she is around him, Henry acts as detached and indifferent (to family matters) as usual. When he sees himself alone his despair

[8] *Ibidem*, p. 69.
[9] *Ibidem,* p. 67.



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overcomes him and he acts out of impulses not knowing for sure what he is actually doing. John compares Henry with a broken reed and underlines his incapacity of taking interest in other people - even his own family: "Broken reeds are seldom good mixers. They're far too busy with their ideas, their sensuality and their psycho-somatic complaints to be able to take an interest in other people – even their own wives and children. They live in a state of the most profound voluntary ignorance, not knowing anything about anybody, but abounding in preconceived opinions about everything."[10] Such a state of ignorance seems to be a fruitful one for the physicist because he is able to expand his scientific theories and to prosper in the field that holds most of his time. Due to the fact that his relations with other people are quite reduced he develops preconceived attitudes towards situations over which he feels he has no control. John Rivers seems to accuse Henry of not being more aware in front of who he reveals his feelings paying more attention to the person who is willing to listen to his complaints: "No, this was essentially a less human reaction; and one of the elements of its sub-humanity was the fact, the utterly outrageous and senseless fact, that it was taking place in the presence of someone who was neither an intimate friend nor a professional counsellor – merely a shocked young bumpkin with a too pious background and a pair of receptive but shuddering ears."[11]

John Rivers goes further in the analysis of this great physicist by showing that Henry lacked humanity because he did not know himself or the ones around him: "And humanity was something in which poor Henry was incapable, congenitally, of taking an interest. […] For he was as little aware of his own humanity as of other people's. His ideas and his sensations – yes, he knew all about *those*. But who was the man who had the ideas and felt the sensations? And how was this man related to the things and people around him? How, above all, *ought* he to be related to them? I doubt if it ever occurred to Henry to ask himself such questions."[12] John appears to be sure that Henry was too preoccupied with his scientific world in order to notice the amount of events that took place around him. He knew his ideas and his sensations, but he avoided asking questions about who was the man who lived all those things. Or at least John envisages him in this way.

Henry's identity remains veiled because the reader gets only glimpses of this man whose life, at certain points, remains a mystery even for John. What is more shocking for John is that all those issues about married life and relations between sexes were brought to him by the man he respected above all others: "And yet these horrors were being poured into

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 70.
[11] *Ibidem*, p. 72.
[12] *Ibidem*, p. 71.



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my ears by the man whom I respected above all others, the man who, for intellect and scientific intuition, surpassed everyone I had ever known. And he was uttering his horrors in connection with the woman whom I loved as Dante had loved Beatrice; as Petrarch worshipped Laura. […] And even if he hadn't been accusing Katy of unfaithfulness, I should have been appalled by what he said. For what he said implied that the horrors were as much a part of marriage as of adultery."[13] John Rivers is faced with a difficult challenge. He has to try to understand something from Henry's accusations (that Katy was unfaithful to him) and to adapt them to his beliefs and his way of approaching life. The shock of discovering that things are not the way he was raised to believe they were places him in deep confusion. He looks as if he lost his direction, not knowing where to go or what to think. John does not insist on the way he analyzed this occurrence, but the fact that he remembers this incident in old age is a sign of the great impact it must have had upon him.

After this episode Henry gets so sick that Katy has to return home with the price of leaving her mother alone. Her return home brings modifications in both her husband's and John's life. Her mother's illness transformed her completely. She was still beautiful but she seemed to lack the sparkle of life so vital for Henry's recovery. For a few days she was not able to do anything to improve Henry's situation. One night Katy enters John's room and announces him her mother had died. This is the instant when everything changes between the two. Trying to bring her some piece of mind Rivers is only able to tell her not to cry. She tells him she has not cried like that since before she got married. Only later does John comprehend the full significance of that phrase: "A wife who permitted herself to cry would never have done for poor old Henry. His chronic weakness had compelled her to be unremittingly strong. But even the most stoical fortitude has its limits. […] Circumstances had been too much for her. But, by way of compensation, she had been granted a holiday from responsibility, had been permitted, if only for a few brief minutes, to indulge in the, for her, unprecedented luxury of tears."[14] That night started their love affair.

The next day she was able to perform the miracle on her husband because she appeared again to be full of life and energy. After Henry recovered their affair continued and John Rivers is the only one who constantly insists that his guilt does not let him be at peace with himself. Katy, the goddess, because she remained like that for John, did not seem to understand John's needs. When he finally compels her to listen to his remorse Katy laughs, revealing a laughter of a goddess, of a person who finds herself above the ordinary matters. John does not understand her attitude and he justifies it by reminding us she was a goddess

[13] *Ibidem*, p. 73.
[14] *Ibidem*, p. 87.



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and she had some detachment from the common people. John thinks that goddesses "[…] are all of one piece. There's no internal conflict in them. Whereas the lives of people like you and me are one long argument. Desires on one side, woodpeckers on the other. Never a moment of real silence. What I needed most at that time was a dose of justificatory good language to counteract the effect of all that vile-base-foul. But Katy wouldn't give it me."[15] She was satisfied that she was able to become her old self again and to save Henry. Nothing else mattered. She told John that she sacrificed more than Rivers could imagine for keeping a sick genius alive and tolerably sane (this appears to have been her job). She suggests being more aware than many of living in a lie and that John had no right to tell *her* that he cannot live a lie. Her response to John's feelings of guilt made him wonder about this goddess's previous experience, but he never discovered anything else. Her inner self remains a puzzle, a veil Rivers has not been able to remove. Their affair ends as Katy's daughter finds out about their relation and writes a poem in which she shows that she knows everything. While driving the car, Katy and Ruth, her daughter, fight and Katy loses the control of the car and they both die.

Analyzing the struggle underwent by John Rivers, Henry Maartens and Katy, several aspects regarding their identities reach surface. On the one hand we notice the profound implications of John's narrative through which he tries to achieve some self-awareness about who he is. His moral dilemma represents a means through which he evaluates his life and tries to see where he stands. His search for understanding his inner self and grasping at his identity are well displayed by one of Charles Taylor's idea: "To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary."[16]

John's question, 'How can anyone seriously believe in his own identity? has gained through the analysis manifold interpretations. According to John Rivers one cannot actually trust one's identity precisely because it is not a fixed point, it is not something that one can say it is here or there. One's identity is formed by the various experiences one passes through and it is always changing direction. Combining the present manner of approaching existence with the naïve perception from the past helps Rivers become aware that his identity has changed over time and his views of life and its people have acquired other meanings. Katy's and Henry's identities remain hidden in certain aspects because John is not able to fully clarify the role they played in his individual growth as he cannot comprehend some of their attitudes and reactions. Even John's identity isn't something to be certain of, as he constantly challenges his listener to look beyond his words and beyond appearances. The veil upon these

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 103.
[16] Charles Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 28.



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character's identities remains as a mark of the quest each individual has to undertake in order to give meaning to his / her life.

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